



**Los Angeles County  
Office of Education**

Leading Educators ▪ Supporting Students ▪ Serving Communities

**HOUSE HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS,  
PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE**

**"CARING FOR SPECIAL NEEDS DURING DISASTERS:  
WHAT'S BEING DONE FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS?"**

**THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION**

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<p><b>TESTIMONY OF DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT JON R. GUNDRY</b></p>
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**JUNE 15, 2010**

Good morning. My name is Jon Gundry. I am Deputy Superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education. I am pleased to be here today, on behalf of the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Darline Robles.

### **Overview**

I am going to speak briefly about the importance for comprehensive and coordinated emergency preparedness planning for local education agencies, and to summarize some lessons we have learned in Los Angeles County in planning for and responding to emergency situations that have affected schools and students in our County. I am also here to express our strong support for legislation introduced by your subcommittee Chair, Representative Laura Richardson, H.R. 4898, the “Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Preparedness Planning Act.”

### **About LACOE and the County**

County offices of education were established in California in 1855 to directly oversee public schools. Today, the county offices are intermediate education agencies that provide services to school districts, exercise oversight of certain school district functions, and provide direct classroom instruction for juvenile offenders and many of the children in the county with severe disabilities. The Los Angeles County Office of

Education—“LACOE,” for short— serves 80 school districts with 2 million preschool and school-age children, nearly a third of the students in the state of California.

Students in Los Angeles public schools are a highly vulnerable population in times of emergency, not only because they are located in a place that is at high risk of terrorist attack and natural disaster, but also because many thousands of those children have special needs. Among them are students with disabilities, with limited English proficiency, or those living in unstable circumstances or suffering financial hardship. The number of severely disabled students in the county is approximately 170,000, about 27,000 of whom are directly served by LACOE programs.

#### **Need for Improved Coordination**

Parents rely on schools to keep their children safe. In fact, parents are concerned about safety above everything else when they send their children to school. Although schools and school districts have emergency plans in place, they are generally not as comprehensive as they should be and not well coordinated with other agencies and school districts. This is primarily due to the fact that they are not given an active role in regional emergency planning, they lack the expertise of many other public agencies in emergency planning, and they do not have sufficient funding to do the necessary planning and preparation.

In Los Angeles County, LACOE serves as the coordinating agency for school districts for emergency preparedness and response.

During the national response to the spring 2009 swine flu outbreak, for example, LACOE played a key role in keeping school districts current with public health information and directives so schools could prepare for outbreaks and respond effectively to them.

LACOE's Communications and Emergency Response Director, Frank Kwan, who I am pleased to have with me today, directed this initiative. For several years prior to this outbreak, Mr. Kwan worked with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health to present a series of avian and pandemic flu preparedness conferences for school personnel. These conferences also stressed the urgent need for school districts to begin planning for a variety of potential public health emergencies.

LACOE continues to coordinate with public health and other local, state and national agencies and to provide input on county emergency and disaster planning. By way of example, LACOE is currently participating in Operation Golden Phoenix 2010, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate. Golden Phoenix deals with the nightmare scenario of the detonation of an improvised nuclear device.

In partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey, LACOE co-sponsored the nation's largest earthquake-preparedness exercise in 2008, the Great Southern California ShakeOut. Nearly 1.5 million students in Los Angeles County were among the 5.5 million Southern Californians who took part in the exercise. LACOE was also a key

player in The Great California ShakeOut in 2009, and we are currently preparing for the upcoming 2010 event.

In addition to earthquakes, we live with ongoing issues with air quality and the threat of other natural disasters such as wild fires, flash floods, and mud slides. Because we serve as the coordinating agency for emergency preparedness and response for school districts in the county, we must anticipate and respond to any threat to the health and safety of our schools and students. We do our best to assist school districts by doing such things as issuing air quality alerts, advisories of possible earthquake aftershocks, and notice of emergency street closures. Our purpose is to anticipate safety issues that may affect school children in order to communicate effectively with school districts and assist in the coordination of emergency response efforts.

### **Recommendations for Improved Preparedness and Response**

While we believe we do a good job of coordinating emergency planning and response among Los Angeles County school districts, there is still a need for better training and closer collaboration among county agencies. For this reason, we urge the creation of a system of school alert and response networks on a local or regional basis that would more closely coordinate with emergency response agencies and school districts, not only in LA County, but in all regions of the country that are under a high threat of terrorist attack, natural disaster, or public health emergency.

Because of their special relationships with communities and families, school districts, educational support agencies, and local education agencies should take leadership and be an integral part of emergency and disaster planning and training. School districts and schools would welcome the opportunity for stronger coordination with local/state/federal emergency responders in time of emergency.

### **Funding Constraints**

An obvious barrier to creating or expanding comprehensive emergency planning and response systems is a shortage of staff and resources. With the continuing crisis in education funding, school districts and LEAs across America face unprecedented financial challenges. Given current dwindling resources, LACOE is hard-pressed to sustain its own level of emergency outreach and training activities, let alone improve our communication and coordination efforts.

Given the priority on meeting the demands of accountability for student academic achievement, school administrators struggling with severe cash-flow problems are unlikely to allocate funds dedicated to emergency planning and response.

### **Proposed Legislation**

This is why H.R. 4898 is so critical in helping to ensure that school districts are prepared in time of emergency. The bill would authorize the Secretary of Homeland Security to establish a competitive national program to make emergency preparedness planning and implementation grants to local educational agencies and districts located

in areas under a high threat of terrorist attacks, natural disasters, or public health emergencies.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Los Angeles County Office of Education supports creating better ways for school communities to proactively prepare for, and effectively respond to emergency situations in order to safeguard students. We are committed to meeting our obligations to all students and children in our county, and especially those who are most vulnerable population in time of emergency.

Thank you for the opportunity to address these important issues. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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